

# Ethics in Early Childhood Education

*Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, intimidating, emotionally damaging or physically harmful to children.* National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998

**Ethical behavior should guide decision making of early childhood professionals at all times.**

Many things affect the decisions of teachers regarding young children in their care: family values, home culture and language, school or program policies, and society in general. Teachers are constantly making decisions about children. Usually decisions are made with the child's family or other professionals. But, sometimes a situation will not lend itself to a clear answer and educators get caught making a decision between equally unfavorable alternatives. This kind of a dilemma is referred to as an "ethical dilemma." For example:

- Most teachers of young children know that the research related to retention suggests that it is not in the best interest of the child, educationally or emotionally. However, in some situations, grade retention is routinely practiced and encouraged for certain children. If the teacher knows of the research and is forced to practice something against her best judgment, the teacher is faced with a professional dilemma.
- A teacher may feel the employer is not following the state licensing standards for child to adult ratio. If he/she reports the situation, he may be fired, even though he is trying to improve the learning environment and he loves and needs his job. What does he do?
- A school district may require the use of corporal punishment, which is in conflict with an administrator's professional beliefs about positive discipline for children. What should she/he do?

*Ethics is the science which enables us to understand humanity as it is and humanity as it could be; and then instructs us on how to move from reality to the ideal. To act ethically is to exercise choice which ends in right action. Virtue is the cause of right choice.*

MacIntyre 1981

In some cases, solving the problem is a matter of reversing what has been an unacceptable trend or practice. It may be a case of education, training, or communication with all parties. But often there is not a simple answer. Often, "the right answer" doesn't surface or two values are in conflict and the early childhood practitioner feels caught in the middle. We are forced into choosing an answer that doesn't feel right. But in every case, we must focus on doing the right thing, making an ethical decision.

*The NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct* can be used to help make difficult decisions. It is a reference to help clarify our thinking and prioritize our responsibilities. Divided into

three parts, it is built upon **Core Values** that we hold about **what we ought to do and to be** with young children, the **Principles** that define practices, and **Ideals**, or exemplary practice. It is a professional compass for use in making a decision.

The **Core Values** are “deeply rooted in the history of our field” such as:

- Appreciating childhood as a unique and valuable stage of the human life cycle
- Basing our work with children on knowledge of child development
- Appreciating and supporting the close ties between the child and family
- Recognizing that children are best understood and supported in the context of family, culture, community, and society
- Respecting the dignity, worth, and uniqueness of each individual (child, family member, and colleague).

The **Ideals** guide actions. Conscientious practitioners:

- Are familiar with the knowledge base of early childhood care and education and keep current through continuing education and in-service training
- Recognize and respect the uniqueness and the potential of each child
- Respect the dignity of each family and its culture, language, customs, and beliefs.
- Establish and maintain relationships of respect, trust, and cooperation with co-workers.
- Create a climate of trust and candor that will enable staff to speak and act in the best interest of children, families, and the field of early childhood care and education

The **Principles** guide our responsibilities. The most important principle:

- ***Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, intimidating, emotionally damaging or physically harmful to children.***

**This principle has precedence over all others in the Code.**

The *Code of Ethics* should guide our daily work with young children. It should be used when we make decisions and set policies. It defines our responsibility to support children—*without harm*—to reach challenging and achievable goals. It can be used to open a dialogue when we face difficult decisions. It can be used to help us ‘think aloud’ and reflect with colleagues who share our concern for children. As a profession, we must hold ourselves to the highest standards in order to provide safe, healthy, nurturing and responsive settings for children when making decisions.

## References

MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After virtue*, London. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (1998). *Code of ethical conduct*. Washington, DC: Author.

Note: *The content of the position statement was adapted with permission from NAYEC’s The Code of Ethical Conduct, which is included at the end of the position statement section.*